

September 13, 2002

1420 East 6th Ave.
P.O. Box 200701
Helena, MT 59620-0701

Environmental Quality Council
Montana Department of Environmental Quality
Montana Department of Fish, Wildlife and Parks
Fisheries Division
Endangered Species Coordinator
Native Species Coordinator, Fisheries
Kalispell Office

MT Department of Natural Resources and Conservation
MT Environmental Information Center
Montana Audubon Council
State Historic Preservation Office
Flathead Conservation District, 30 Lower Valley Road, Kalispell, MT 59901
U.S. Army Corp of Engineers, Helena
U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Helena
Montana State Library, Helena
Scott Payne, P.O Box 636, Sheridan, MT 59749

Ladies and Gentlemen:

Please find enclosed an Environmental Assessment prepared for a Future Fisheries Project tentatively planned to reinforce an existing diversion structure on Mount Creek to ensure that it remains a fish passage barrier for the protection of a genetically pure westslope cutthroat trout population. Additionally, the project calls for enhancing the riparian vegetative community by planting riparian shrubs, installing a riparian pasture fence and repairing a boundary fence. Mount Creek, a tributary to Ashley Creek, is located approximately 12 miles southwest of the city of Kalispell.

Please submit any comments that you have by 5:00 P.M., October 13, 2002 to the Department of Fish, Wildlife and Parks in Helena at the address listed above. Completion of this project is contingent upon approval being granted by the Fish, Wildlife and Parks Commission. If you have any questions, feel free to contact me at (406) 444-2432.

Sincerely,

Mark Lere, Program Officer
Habitat Protection Bureau
Fisheries Division
e-mail: mlere@mt.state.us

*Flathead
Future Fisheries*

ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT

Fisheries Division

Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks

Mount Creek Fish Passage Barrier and Riparian Enhancement Project

General Purpose: The 1995 Montana Legislature enacted statute 87-1-272 through 273 that directs the Department to administer a Future Fisheries Improvement Program. The program involves physical projects to restore degraded fish habitat in rivers and lakes for the purposes of improving wild fisheries. The legislature established a funding account to help accomplish this goal. Additionally, the 1999 Montana Legislature amended statute sections 87-1-273, 15-38-202 and Section 5, Chapter 463, Laws of 1995 to create a bull trout and cutthroat trout enhancement program. The program calls for the enhancement of bull trout and cutthroat trout through habitat restoration, natural reproduction and reductions in species competition by way of the Future Fisheries Program.

This project calls for reinforcing an existing diversion structure on Mount Creek to ensure that it remains a fish passage barrier for the protection of a genetically pure population of westslope cutthroat trout. Additionally, the project calls for enhancing the riparian vegetative community by planting native shrubs, installing riparian fencing and repairing a boundary fence. Mount Creek is a small tributary that enters Ashley Creek approximately 12 miles southwest of the city of Kalispell. The project site is located on a reach of stream that flows through a section of state school trust land.

I. Location of Project: This project will be conducted on Mount Creek, a tributary to the Ashley Creek, located approximately 12 miles southwest of the city of Kalispell within Township 26 North, Range 23 West, Section 26 in Flathead County (see Figure 1).

II. Need for the Project: One goal within Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks six-year operations plan for the fisheries program is to "restore and enhance degraded habitats" by implementing habitat restoration projects and administering the Future Fisheries Improvement Program to restore important habitats on public and private lands. This proposed project would help achieve this goal.

Westslope cutthroat trout are considered a species of special concern in Montana because of their declining numbers and shrinking distribution. Upper Mount Creek supports a genetically pure westslope cutthroat trout population. This population is protected from encroachment by non-native rainbow trout and brook trout because an existing diversion structure acts as a fish passage barrier. However, this diversion structure was poorly designed and has the potential of being washed out. This project calls for reinforcing the dam to insure security of this genetically pure cutthroat trout population. Additionally, the project calls for restoring the riparian vegetative community along a 1,000-foot reach of stream that flows through upper Browns Meadow. Historically, the Brown's Meadow reach had been straightened and over-grazed by livestock. This historic use resulted in the loss of shrubs within the riparian corridor, entrenchment of the channel, associated lowering of the water table, and accelerated bank erosion. Fortunately, natural processes have allowed the stream to re-create some sinuosity and a floodplain bench within the entrenched channel. This project calls for planting riparian shrubs, installing brush bundles and installing fencing to facilitate the channel recovery process.

III. Scope of the Project: The proposal calls for reinforcing an existing diversion dam to ensure the integrity of a pure westslope cutthroat trout population. Although the final design is not completed,

reinforcement of the dam likely will involve placement of rock on the downstream face to prevent erosion when the dam over-tops during high water events. Additionally, the project calls for planting riparian shrubs within the stream corridor using one-gallon stock (825 plants) and small container stock (600 plants). Shrub species include red osier dogwood, willow, cottonwood, chokecherry, hawthorne, alder and spruce. The project also calls for installing brush bundles and fascines to stabilize eroding banks on the upper portions of the project reach. Finally, the project calls for repairing a boundary fence on the north and east side of the project to protect the site from trespass livestock and installing a 1-mile long riparian pasture fence that would be setback approximately 100 feet from the stream. This project is a small part of a much larger watershed restoration effort proposed for the Ashley Creek drainage.

The project is expected to cost \$30,059.00. Of this total, the Future Fisheries Improvement Program would be contributing up to \$24,600.00.

IV. Environmental Impact Checklist:

Please see attached checklist.

V. Explanation of Impacts to the Physical Environment:

1. Terrestrial and aquatic life and habitats.

There will be no adverse affects to aquatic life as a result of the proposed project. Implementation of this project would protect a genetically pure population of westslope cutthroat trout population from encroachment by non-native fish species and would restore the vegetative community along a 1,000-foot reach of riparian corridor. Ultimately, this project would help secure the long-term viability of an isolated cutthroat trout population.

2. Water quantity, quality and distribution.

Short-term increases in turbidity may occur during project construction. To minimize turbidity, construction will occur during a low flow period and operation of equipment in the stream channel will be minimized to the extent practicable. The Department of Environmental Quality will be contacted to determine narrative conditions required to meet short-term water quality standards and protect aquatic biota. A 310 permit will be obtained from the local Conservation District and the U.S. Army Corp of Engineers will be contacted for requirements needed to meet the federal Clean Water Act (404 permit). In the long term, planting riparian shrubs, installing brush bundles for erosion control and installing fencing are expected to improve water quality in Mount Creek.

3. Geology and soil quality, stability and moisture.

Soils along the stream margin would be disturbed during construction, but would be stabilized with re-vegetation efforts and installation of riparian fencing.

4. Vegetation cover, quantity and quality.

Riparian vegetation and cover would be disturbed during the period of construction. Proposed re-

vegetation efforts and installation of riparian fencing would act to mitigate these disturbances.

5. Aesthetics.

Aesthetics would be negatively affected during project construction because of ground disturbance and the presence of heavy equipment. In the long term, aesthetics are expected to be enhanced by improvements in vegetation and cover within the riparian corridor.

7. Unique, endangered, fragile, or limited environmental resources.

Westslope cutthroat trout are native to Montana and are classified as a "Species of Special Concern" because of their shrinking distribution and declining numbers. Upper Mount Creek supports a population of genetically pure westslope cutthroat trout. This population is isolated from non-native rainbow trout and brook trout by an existing diversion dam. This dam appears to be losing stability over time and is susceptible to breaching during a high water event. Reinforcing the dam and enhancing the riparian vegetative community is expected to help secure the long-term viability of this isolated cutthroat trout population.

9. Historic and archaeological sites

The proposed project may require an individual Army Corp of Engineers (COE) 404 permit. Therefore, the State Historic Preservation Office will be contacted to determine the need for compliance with the federal historic preservation regulations. The project will not begin until a cultural clearance is granted.

VI. Explanation of Impacts on the Human Environment.

4. Agricultural or industrial production.

The current lessee of this state school trust section does not own cattle nor do they have current plans to graze this leased section of land. Repair of the boundary fence is intended keep trespass livestock out of the section. Installation of the riparian fence and water gaps would separate the section into two grazing pastures to allow for better livestock management should the lessee decide to graze livestock in the future.

7. Access to & quality of recreational activities.

It is anticipated that this project would improve overall aquatic habitat in Mount Creek and, as a result, would enhance the resident cutthroat trout population. With the purchase of a permit, this section of school trust land is legally accessible by the public.

VII. Discussion and Evaluation of Reasonable Alternatives.

1. No Action Alternative

If no action is taken, this reach of Mount Creek will continue to be unstable and the riparian

corridor will continue to lack a shrub component. Additionally, the westslope cutthroat trout population will continue to be threatened by the potential loss of the fish barrier. If the barrier breached, the cutthroat trout population would become intergressed with non-native rainbow trout. Ultimately, a genetically pure population of westslope cutthroat trout would be lost as a result of hybridization with rainbow trout.

2. Channel Reconstruction Alternative

This alternative was considered but rejected because of cost and because the stream, through natural processes, has re-created some sinuosity and a floodplain bench. Natural processes will continue to act on this altered stream reach until discharge, slope and sediment return to some form of equilibrium.

3. The Proposed Alternative

The proposed alternative is designed to secure a genetically pure population of westslope cutthroat trout in Mount Creek. Additionally, the project would enhance the vegetative community within a 1,000-foot reach of the riparian corridor. This alternative would be expected to improve fish and wildlife habitat in Mount Creek and would protect a population of westslope cutthroat trout from encroachment by non-native rainbow trout and brook trout.

VIII. Environmental Assessment Conclusion Section

1. Is an EIS required? No.

We conclude from this review that the proposed activities will have a positive impact on the physical and human environment.

2. Level of public involvement.

The proposed project was reviewed and supported by the public review panel of the Future Fisheries Improvement Program. The proposed project also will be reviewed by the Fish, Wildlife and Parks Commission and will be contingent upon their approval. The Environmental Assessment (EA) is being distributed to all individuals and groups listed on the cover letter. The EA also will be published on Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks web page: fwp.state.mt.us.

3. Duration of comment period?

Public comment will be accepted through 5:00 P.M. on October 13, 2002.

4. Person responsible for preparing the EA.

Mark Lere, Program Officer
Habitat Protection Bureau

Fisheries Division

Montana Department of Fish, Wildlife and Parks

1420 East 6th Avenue

Helena, MT 59620

Telephone: (406) 444-2432

e-mail: mlere@mt.state.us

MONTANA DEPARTMENT OF FISH, WILDLIFE AND PARKS
1420 E 6th Ave, PO BOX 200701, Helena, MT 59620-0701
(406) 444-2535

ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT

Project Title Mount Creek Fish Passage Barrier and Riparian Enhancement Project

Division/Bureau Fisheries Division-Future Fisheries Improvement

Description of Project This project is being proposed to reinforce an existing diversion structure on Mount Creek to ensure that it remains a fish passage barrier for the protection of a genetically pure westslope cutthroat trout population. Additionally, the project calls for enhancing the riparian vegetative community by planting riparian shrubs, installing a riparian pasture fence and repairing a boundary fence. The proposed project is located on state school trust property located approximately 12 miles southwest of the city of Kalispell.

POTENTIAL IMPACT ON PHYSICAL ENVIRONMENT

	MAJOR	MODERATE	MINOR	NONE	UNKNOWN	COMMENTS ON ATTACHED PAGES
1. Terrestrial & aquatic life and habitats			X			X
2. Water quality, quantity & distribution			X			X
3. Geology & soil quality, stability & moisture			X			X
4. Vegetation cover, quantity & quality			X			X
5. Aesthetics			X			X
6. Air quality				X		
7. Unique, endangered, fragile, or limited environmental resources			X			X
8. Demands on environmental resources of land, water, air & energy				X		
9. Historical & archaeological sites				X		X

POTENTIAL IMPACTS ON THE HUMAN ENVIRONMENT

	MAJOR	MODERATE	MINOR	NONE	UNKNOWN	COMMENTS ON ATTACHED PAGES
1. Social structures & mores				X		
2. Cultural uniqueness & diversity				X		
3. Local & state tax base & tax revenue				X		
4. Agricultural or industrial production				X		X
5. Human health				X		
6. Quantity & distribution of community & personal income				X		
7. Access to & quality of recreational and wilderness activities			X			X
8. Quantity & distribution of employment				X		
9. Distribution & density of population & housing				X		
10. Demands for government services				X		
11. Industrial & commercial activity				X		
12. Demands for energy				X		
13. Locally adopted environmental plans & goals				X		
14. Transportation networks & traffic flows				X		

Other groups or agencies contacted or which may have overlapping jurisdiction: Montana Department of Natural Resources and Conservation, Flathead Conservation District, US Fish and Wildlife Service, US Army Corp of Engineers, Montana Department of Environmental Quality, State Historical Preservation Office
 Individuals or groups contributing to this EA: Scott Payne, Kirk Environmental LLC; Watershed Consulting, Inc.
 Recommendation concerning preparation of EIS: No EIS required.
 EA prepared by: Mark Lere

Date: September 13, 2002

